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Outside relationships of Australian languages

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Before colonisation perhaps as many as a thousand distinct varieties, constituting nearly three hundred mutually unintelligible languages, were spoken in the area that has become Australia. While these languages vary considerably, it has long been assumed that most are genetically related within what has come to be known as the Australian phylum, and since Dixon (1980) this certainly seems to be true of at least those spoken on the Australian mainland. For some of the off-shore languages of Australia this is less certain, and thus it should not be surprising that there has been even less convincing evidence of a relationship with languages outside Australia. This paper thus starts with a brief overview with what is believed about the relationships of languages within Australia before considering proposals for more distant relationships.

The situation within Australia

It is especially clear that the bulk of languages spoken across much of the Australian mainland, with the exception of the northwest and much of the north central regions, are related within what is known as the Pama-Nyungan family; for recent overviews see Alpher (2004) and O'Grady and Hale (2004). The exact membership of this phylum has undergone review in recent years (see e.g. Evan and Jones 1997: 385-92) but this is largely just a question of what to include within the family and what to treat as closely related to it.

The remaining languages of the mainland, in the northwest and north central, are substantially different, notably in that they usually have pronominal and other prefixes on verbs that Pama-Nyungan languages do not. Even so, they still show substantial evidence of relationship among each other and with the Pama-Nyungan languages. Significant comparative work involving some of these languages was recently published in a volume edited by Evans (2003).

The relationships of some off-shore languages are less clear. In the Torres Strait, the western group of varieties, such as Kala Kawaw Ya of Saibai Island, is a reasonably typical Pama-Nyungan language in terms of its pronouns and occasional aspects of grammar, but there is less evidence for this relationship in its lexicon, which to some extent has been borrowed from the eastern Torres Strait language, Meriam Mir. The latter is otherwise quite different from other Australian languages, and in fact is it obviously related to certain languages in nearby areas of Papua New Guinea; it is in fact the one indigenous Australian language that it clearly related to languages outside the country.

Of other off-shore languages, the Tiwi language of Bathurst and Melville Islands shows some similarities with Australian languages in its pronouns, and some aspects of its grammar can also seem related to those of some mainland languages. At the same time it seems very difficult to find much lexical evidence of a relationship with the mainland languages. I know less about the Anindilyagwa language of Groote Eylandt, but at a time when Dixon (1980) believed in the genetic relationship of most Australian languages, he felt that the evidence for Tiwi and Anindilyagwa was the least substantial.

For the island of Tasmania we have poor and limited attestations of what seems to have been about a dozen indigenous languages, and it is simply unclear to what extent these might have been related to the languages of the mainland (Dixon 1980: 233).

Relations with outside languages

Over the past century and a half there have been various suggestions about possible affiliations between Australian languages and those outside Australia, including Austronesian, Papuan, Dravidian, Andamanese, and even indigenous American languages (e.g. Rivet 1925). Most of the early proposals were reviewed by Ray (1925) and more recently summarised by Dixon (1980: 236-7, 488-9), who felt that the typological similarities with Dravidian were striking, but that there was little evidence of cognates.

Earlier it was noted that the western varieties of Torres Strait, such as Kala Kawaw Ya, seem to group with the Pama-Nyungan languages of the Australian mainland, despite heavy borrowing from the Papuan language of eastern Torres Strait. In the 1980s I saw a fascinating manuscript by Rod Mitchell suggesting that many Kala Kawaw Ya forms could be Austronesian in origin, whether genetically or through borrowing. An example I was already familiar with was the form *susu* for ‘breast’ or ‘milk’, which seems to be widespread Austronesian, and which I also found as *tjutju* in at least one mainland Australian language of northeastern Cape York Peninsula. Presumably more information can now be found in a masters thesis by Mitchell (1995).

However, the most promising place to look for possible relatives to Australian languages seems to be New Guinea. When such possibilities were considered by Wurm (1975), he could do little more than note evidence of borrowing across the Torres Strait, with, for example, *kalka* and various related forms for ‘spear’ throughout Cape York Peninsula apparently having originated from forms more like *kalak* in New Guinea. Foley (1986: 269-75) did much better, pointing out seventeen possible cognates between widespread Australian vocabulary and forms (sometimes reconstructions) in the Eastern Highland languages of New Guinea; these included two pronouns, five monosyllabic verbs, and ten items of relatively basic vocabulary. Foley himself characterised his evidence as ‘a first attempt’ and ‘not strongly compelling’.

Possibly Foley’s evidence may have been surpassed in an unpublished paper by Donohue and Terrill (1996), which is said to have suggested a connection between the Australian languages just south of Torres Strait and those in New Guinea just north of the nearby coast. However, the fact that twenty years after Foley’s work I have yet to see anything further in print leaves me wondering whether a better case can be made, since it does not seem to take much effort to find small numbers of possible cognates between just about any two languages or groups, as Dyen (1970) once demonstrated for Indo-European and Australian.

In an attempt to justify my cynicism I spent about half an hour trying to see how good a case I could develop for a relationship between widespread Australian forms (A, e.g. as in Dixon 1980: 100) and Japanese (J). This yielded eight possible cognates, namely A *miil*, J *me* ‘eye’ (and *mi*- ‘see’); A *ngaan*- ‘who’, J *nan(i)* ‘what’; A *ya(n)*- ‘say’, J *yar*- ‘do, give’; A *minh*- ‘what, animal’, J *minna* ‘every-one/-thing’; some A *kapu* ‘water’, J *kawa* ‘river’; and the following three that involve a correspondence between A *l* and J *t*

(or ts allophonically): A bula, J futa-, 'two'; A jalany, J shita, 'tongue'; and A mal- 'get', J mots- 'have, hold'. I wonder how long it would take me to double the number to match Foley's evidence.

Conclusions

The evidence I have seen makes me believe that if we are ever able to establish relations between Australian languages and those elsewhere, the most promising area to consider is New Guinea, where regrettably we have quite a varied range of languages to consider. But from what I have seen, this still remains to be done.

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